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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000092

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, PRM/ANE

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN DONATIONS FOR GAZA FILL UNRWA-SYRIA AND
HAMAS COFFERS

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: UNRWA Director for Syria reported on recent fundraising activity by his organization aimed at providing critical humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza. UNRWA's creative fundraising efforts, a telethon among them, coupled with generous donations from ordinary Syrians and corporations alike, has raised nearly \$17 million over the past month. UNRWA-Syria reported its aim was to collect \$25 million to assist in the rebuilding of Gaza and provide immediate relief to its citizens. According to UNRWA, Hamas has also benefited from the generosity of the Syrian masses, perhaps collecting as much as \$20 million since the end of December, using the bully pulpit of Friday mosque sermons to elicit the bulk of these funds. Separately, UNRWA reported that despite its best efforts to convince the SARG to address the dire Iraqi Palestinian refugee humanitarian situation in Al-Tanf, SARG rhetoric in support of the Palestinian people has not been matched by action in assisting this desperate population in Syria. END SUMMARY.

UNRWA'S CREATIVE FUND RAISING DRIVE ELICITS MILLIONS

12. (C) Director of UNRWA Affairs for Syria Panos Moutzis reported to PolOff January 28 on recent private and public efforts to raise money to help the people of Gaza in the wake of recent Palestinian/Israeli hostilities. Shortly after the beginning of hostilities in Gaza, he started receiving phone calls and visitors from Syrian corporations and private citizens all asking how they might contribute to UNRWA relief efforts in Gaza. In some cases, interested Syrians delivered envelopes filled with as much as 460,000 Syrian Pounds (roughly \$10,000) for the cause.

13. (C) The unprecedented outpouring of financial support spurred Moutzis to organize an UNRWA fundraising campaign (after securing SARG approval), which included the dissemination of donation boxes, organized musical events, and a telethon. According to Moutzis, Syrian First Lady Asma Asad summoned him in early January and asked how she might be of service in raising in-kind and financial assistance to the people of Gaza. Her interest, according to Moutzis, has enabled UNRWA to embark on a campaign that has raised close to \$17 million. UNRWA's most visible event, a telethon broadcast on Syrian's main television channel, raised nearly \$500,000 in under six hours. Syriatel and MTA (the two cell phones service providers in Syria) created a dedicated phone number for call-in donations from the public. The caller would then have a prescribed amount (roughly

\$1.00) automatically billed from their account deposited with UNRWA.

¶4. (C) Additionally, Moumtzis added the SARG, in coordination with UNRWA, created a fund to which soldiers and civil servants could donate a day's salary, which raised an additional 720 million Syrian Pounds (roughly \$15.7 million).

Moumtzis said he hoped to raise \$25 million by the end of the fundraising drive. But this amount, Moumtzis cautioned, was just a "drop in the bucket" compared to the total funding UNRWA believes is needed. On January 25 UNRWA released its "Quick Response Plan" for Gaza which seeks to collect donations totaling \$345,904,113 to assist in the rebuilding of Gaza.

HAMAS, TOO, BENEFITS FROM SYRIAN GENEROSITY

¶5. (C) Moumtzis reported that significant funds have been collected at mosques throughout Syria since late December, particularly after Friday prayers, though UNRWA has not received any of these donations. According to Moumtzis, donations ranging from four to five million dollars are being generated weekly through the activities of local clerics. Though some of the funds were being directed to the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, much of the money was being funneled by the Syrian Ministry of Religious Affairs to Hamas, Moumtzis noted. Moumtzis speculated that upwards of \$20 million could have reached Hamas coffers since hostilities began in late December.

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STILL NO SOLUTION FOR DESPERATE PALESTINIAN-IRAQI REFUGEES

¶6. (C) Asked about the situation of Palestinian Iraqi refugees residing in Al-Tanf, Moumtzis reported that there had been U.N. discussions with the SARG but no progress. Moumtzis said the SARG continued to funnel Palestinian-Iraqis to two main refugee camps in Syria -- Al-Tanf (roughly 900 individuals) and Al-Hol (approximately 350). The refugees at Al-Tanf remain stuck in a no-man's-land area located between Iraq and Syria in dire conditions. UNHCR reports that camp has neither water nor electricity service and is unsuited for human settlement. The SARG continues to populate the camp with Iraqi Palestinians found to be living in Syria. Additionally, the SARG will not permit the temporary settlement of these Iraqi refugees within Syrian borders. Moumtzis added that the outpouring of support for the Palestinian people presented a window of opportunity to engage the SARG on this delicate issue. Despite UNRWA and UNHCR's coordinated efforts, the SARG had not issued a substantive response to his inquiries.

¶7. (C) Comment: UNRWA has tapped into an outpouring of local sentiment that by Syrian standards has raised unparalleled funds for Gaza. It is noteworthy that the SARG, First Lady Asma Asad, and the Syrian business community have cut through the normal constraints of red tape that hinder fund raising here. This track of financial assistance, in comparison to funds raised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, offers an effective alternative to money going into Hamas bank accounts.

¶8. (C) Comment continued: By comparison, SARG intransigence on the Palestinian-Iraqi refugee situation at Al-Tanf indicates that the Syrian leadership's sympathies only run so deep, despite relentless public diatribes to the contrary.
CONNELLY